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# IN THE COURT OF APPEALS OF INDIANA

IN RE: THE TERMINATION OF THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP OF S.T.,	) ) )
DONALD T., and CAROL T.,	) )
Appellants-Respondents,	)
VS.	) No. 41A04-0712-JV-696
JOHNSON COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SERVICES,	) )
Appellee-Petitioner.	) )

APPEAL FROM THE JOHNSON CIRCUIT COURT

The Honorable K. Mark Loyd, Judge Cause No. 41C01-0503-JC-16 41C01-0610-JT-18 41C01-0610-JT-17

**April 10, 2008** 

**MEMORANDUM DECISION - NOT FOR PUBLICATION** 

# Case Summary and Issue

Carol T. ("Mother") appeals the involuntary termination of her parental rights to her daughter, S.T., claiming the Johnson County Department of Child Services ("JCDCS") failed to prove there was a reasonable probability that the conditions resulting in S.T.'s removal and continued placement outside Mother's care will not be remedied. Concluding that the trial court's judgment is supported by clear and convincing evidence, we affirm.

# Facts and Procedural History

S.T., born on November 15, 2004, is the biological daughter of Mother and Donald T. ("Father"). The facts most favorable to the judgment indicate that on or about March 3, 2005, Mother and Father approached the JCDCS for assistance in providing for the care of S.T. because the family was homeless, both parents were unemployed, and both parents were battling drug addiction. At the request of the parents, the JCDCS immediately took S.T. into custody. Shortly after S.T.'s removal from her parents, Mother, who was on probation, tested positive for cocaine. Mother's probation was thereafter revoked and Mother was incarcerated from April 2005 until February 2006.

Prior to Mother's incarceration, on March 11, 2005, the JCDCS filed a petition alleging S.T. was a child in need of services ("CHINS"). On August 26, 2005, at the initial hearing on the CHINS petition, Mother appeared in person and by counsel and admitted to the allegations in the CHINS petition. The trial court subsequently found S.T. to be a CHINS.

On October 20, 2005, the trial court issued its Dispositional Decree as to Mother and ordered Mother to, among other things, submit to a psychological evaluation and successfully

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Father is not a party to this appeal.

complete all recommendations resulting from the evaluation, submit to a parenting evaluation and successfully complete all recommendations resulting from the evaluation, submit to a drug and alcohol evaluation and successfully complete all recommendations resulting from that evaluation, submit to random drug screens, exercise regular visitation with S.T., notify the JCDCS of any changes in housing, employment, relationships and criminal history, and to resolve all criminal issues.

On October 5, 2006, the JCDCS filed a petition for the involuntary termination of both parents' rights to S.T. The hearing on the termination petition commenced on March 21, 2007, and was thereafter bifurcated. Mother appeared in person and by counsel. The fact-finding hearing concluded on May 9, 2007, and the trial court issued its judgment terminating Mother's parental rights on July 3, 2007. In ordering Mother's parental rights terminated, the trial court made the following pertinent findings:<sup>2</sup>

# I. FINDINGS OF FACT

\* \* \*

- 6. When the child was brought to [JCDCS], there was no evidence that she had been injured, nor was the child malnourished. However, at the time of the placement of the child with [JCDCS]. Both [Father] and [Mother] were suffering from significant substance addictions.
- 7. [Mother] was incarcerated, due to her probation being revoked, beginning in November of 2005, and remained incarcerated until approximately February 8, 2006. Following her incarceration, [Mother] was released to Third Phase (a recovery program), at which time she began exercising visitation with the child.
- 8. As part of the CHINS, this Court ordered [Mother] to work with a home based service provider and complete any recommendations made

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> We commend the trial court for its detailed and thoughtful findings, which greatly aided this Court in reviewing Mother's appeal.

by the provider as a dispositional goal necessary to reunify with the child. [Mother] participated in this service, while she was at Third Phase, but her whereabouts have been intermittently unknown since leaving Third Phase in September/November of 2006, allowing no ability to provide this service to her since then. [Mother] did not complete any similar services on her own, and was removed from Third Phase involuntarily due to her conduct.

- 9. This Court ordered [Mother] to visit with the child on a consistent basis as a dispositional goal necessary to reunify with the child. During the time frame [M]other resided in Third Phase, she consistently visited with the child. While [M]other testified that her lack of visitation since then was due to transportation issues following her voluntary move to Evansville, Indiana, her argument is insufficient to explain the total lack of visitation during the time frame from November 15, 2006 until February 23, 2007.
- 10. There has been no trial home visit with [Mother] . . . since the original removal of the child.
- 11. [Mother] has a history of involvement with DCS relating to two (2) prior born children in Vanderburgh County, Indiana. DCS's removal of those children resulted in the initiation of Child in Need of Services proceedings, and her subsequent criminal conviction for Neglect of a Dependent in 2003. Petitions to Terminate her rights as to those two (2) children were filed, and termination of her parental rights occurred on or about December of 2003.
- 12. [Mother] currently resides in Owensboro, Kentucky and has for approximately one month, in a one (1) bedroom apartment. This Court ordered as a dispositional goal for her to obtain housing that is safe, clean, free of any illegal drugs, drug activity, alcohol or individuals under the influence. This Court makes no findings as to whether or not her residence meets this goal. Prior to her current living situation, she lived for a few weeks at the residence of a man who[m] she was dating. Prior to that time, she stayed, beginning on or about February 23, 2007, for a few weeks with her mother in Evansville. [Mother] moved to Evansville in an attempt to avoid a substance abuse relapse. Prior to moving to Evansville, she lived in the Indianapolis area in various residences, including housing at Third Phase.
- 13. The dispositional goals ordered by the Court were fully explained to [Mother] and [Father]. Each parent was aware of what was expected of

them to safely have their child returned to them.

- 14. Goals ordered by this Court in the CHINS matter as to [Mother], on October 5, 2005, . . . remained unchanged throughout the proceedings. The objectives of the dispositional decree have not been accomplished. If all goals ordered had been met by the parents, there would have been a reasonable probability of success in reunification of the child and parent.
- 15. [Mother] has not, in accordance with a dispositional goal ordered by this Court, provided 24 hour notice of her changes in address, phone number, and relationships due in part, to her having no address for periods of time since the child's removal, except for the time in November of 2005 to September/November of 2006 in which [Mother] was incarcerated or at Third Phase.
- 16. [Mother] receives Social Security Income due to a mental disability, depression and anxiety, which satisfies the dispositional goal ordered by the Court to provide proof of financial resources which would allow her to provide for the child's basic needs.
- 17. [Mother] has completed a psychological evaluation, but has not completed the recommendations of that evaluation as was ordered by this Court as a dispositional goal necessary to safely reunify this mother and child.
- 18. [Mother] has submitted to a parenting assessment. However, she has not completed the recommendations of that assessment as ordered by this Court as a dispositional goal necessary to safely reunify this mother and child.
- 19. This Court finds, consistent with the testimony of [Mother], that she is a drug addict and has a history of drug abuse. She is currently scheduled for, but has not submitted to, a drug and alcohol evaluation. She began drug treatment programs in the past but has not completed any. She has not successfully completed the evaluation including recommendations of the evaluation as ordered by this Court as a dispositional goal necessary to safely reunify this mother and child.
- 20. The Court ordered [Mother] to submit to random drug screens as a dispositional goal necessary to reunify this mother and child. Her whereabouts were intermittently unknown following her incarceration which prohibited the ability to conduct random drug screens.

- 21. The Court finds, consistent with the testimony of [Mother], that she used crack cocaine as recently as April of 2006.
- 22. That the child's father . . . recommends that the mother's parental rights be terminated.

# **II. CONCLUSIONS OF LAW**

\* \* \*

- 10. There is a reasonable probability that:
  - (1) The conditions that resulted in the child's removal or the reasons for the placement outside the mother's home will not be remedied in that;
  - (a) As to [Mother], her original inability to care for the child has not been alleviated due to her continued pattern of instability and failure to comply with numerous goals ordered for her in the CHINS matter designed to safely reunify mother with child.
  - (b) A consideration for this Court was the mother's drug addiction, her continued drug use beyond the child's original removal by the DCS, and her failure to fully complete a drug treatment program.
  - (c) A consideration for this Court was a lack of commitment to visitation with the child and her tenuous addiction issues evidenced by her voluntary move to Evansville to avoid relapse. This Court has concern for the ability of this mother to adequately parent the child when she remains fully involved in taking care of herself.
  - (d) A consideration for this Court was the extent of services offered to [Mother] and her response to the services offered.

Br. of Appellant-Judgment at 2-7.3 This appeal ensued.

## Discussion and Decision

Mother challenges the sufficiency of the evidence supporting the termination of her parental rights to S.T. Specifically, Mother contends that the JCDCS failed to prove by clear and convincing evidence that the conditions leading to S.T.'s removal and continued

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Pursuant to Indiana Appellate Rule 46(A)(10), Mother properly included in her Appellant's Brief a copy of the trial court's judgment terminating her parental rights. However, the pages of the judgment were not re-numbered in accordance with the pages of the brief. Thus, the page numbers cited to herein refer not to

placement outside her care would not be remedied.

### I. Standard of Review

This Court has long had a highly deferential standard of review in cases concerning the termination of parental rights. <u>In re K.S.</u>, 750 N.E.2d 832, 836 (Ind. Ct. App. 2001). When reviewing the termination of parental rights, we neither reweigh the evidence nor judge the credibility of the witnesses. <u>In re Kay L.</u>, 867 N.E.2d 236, 239 (Ind. Ct. App. 2007). Instead, we consider only the evidence that supports the trial court's decision and the reasonable inferences drawn therefrom. Id.

In the instant case, the trial court made specific findings. When the trial court enters specific findings of fact, we apply a two-tiered standard of review. First, we determine whether the evidence supports the findings, and second, we determine whether the findings support the judgment. Bester v. Lake County Office of Family & Children, 839 N.E.2d 143, 147 (Ind. 2005).

In deference to the trial court's unique position to assess the evidence, we will set aside the court's judgment terminating a parent-child relationship only if it is clearly erroneous. In re L.S., 717 N.E.2d 204, 208 (Ind. Ct. App. 1999), trans. denied, cert. denied, 534 U.S. 1161 (2002); see also Bester, 839 N.E.2d at 147. A judgment is clearly erroneous if the findings do not support the trial court's conclusions or the conclusions do not support the judgment thereon. Quillen v. Quillen, 671 N.E.2d 98, 102 (Ind. 1996). If the evidence and inferences support the trial court's decision, we must affirm. L.S., 717 N.E.2d at 208.

# II. Conditions That Resulted in Removal Will Not Be Remedied

The Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution protects the traditional right of parents to establish a home and to raise their children. Bester, 839 N.E.2d at 147. A parent's interest in the care, custody, and control of his or her child is perhaps the oldest of our fundamental liberty interests. Id. However, these parental interests are not absolute and must be subordinated to the child's interests when determining the proper disposition of a petition to terminate parental rights. In re M.B., 666 N.E.2d 73, 76 (Ind. Ct. App. 1996), trans. denied. Parental rights may therefore be terminated when a parent is unable or unwilling to meet his or her parental responsibilities. K.S., 750 N.E.2d at 836.

In order to terminate a parent-child relationship, the State is required to allege and prove that:

- (A) [o]ne (1) of the following exists:
  - (i) the child has been removed from the parent for at least six (6) months under a dispositional decree;

\* \* \*

- (B) there is a reasonable probability that:
  - (i) the conditions that resulted in the child's removal or the reasons for placement outside the home of the parents will not be remedied; or
  - (ii) the continuation of the parent-child relationship poses a threat to the well-being of the child;
- (C) termination is in the best interests of the child; and
- (D) there is a satisfactory plan for the care and treatment of the child.

Ind. Code § 31-35-2-4(b)(2). The State must establish each of these allegations by clear and convincing evidence. Egly v. Blackford County Dep't of Pub. Welfare, 592 N.E.2d 1232, 1234 (Ind. 1992).

Mother does not challenge the trial court's determination (1) that S.T. has been removed from her care for more than six months under a dispositional decree, (2) that termination of Mother's parental rights is in S.T.'s best interests, and (3) that the JCDCS has a satisfactory plan for the care and treatment of S.T., namely, adoption. Rather, Mother asserts that the JCDCS failed to prove by clear and convincing evidence there was a reasonable probability the conditions resulting in S.T.'s removal and continued placement outside her care would not be remedied. Specifically, she claims, "In this case, [JCDCS] failed to meet its burden of proof because the evidence which was presented established that the conditions which brought about the removal had been remedied at the time of the termination." Br. of Appellant at 7. We cannot agree.

When determining whether a reasonable probability exists that the conditions justifying a child's removal and continued placement outside the home will not be remedied, the trial court must judge a parent's fitness to care for his or her children at the time of the termination hearing, taking into consideration evidence of changed conditions. In re J.T., 742 N.E.2d 509, 512 (Ind. Ct. App. 2001), trans. denied. However, the court must also "evaluate the parent's habitual patterns of conduct to determine the probability of future neglect or deprivation of the child." Id. Pursuant to this rule, courts have properly considered evidence of a parent's prior criminal history, drug and alcohol abuse, history of neglect, failure to provide support, and lack of adequate housing and employment. A.F. v. Marion County Office of Family & Children, 762 N.E.2d 1244, 1251 (Ind. Ct. App. 2002), trans. denied. We further note that the JCDCS need not rule out all possibilities of change; rather, it need establish only that there is a reasonable probability that the parent's behavior

will not change. Kay L., 867 N.E.2d at 242.

A careful review of the record leaves this Court convinced that the evidence supports the trial court's findings set forth above. Although Mother attempted to comply with several of the court-ordered services by undergoing a psychological assessment, submitting to a parenting assessment, and even regularly exercising visitation with S.T. during the time she stayed at Third Phase, Mother failed to complete even one of these services. For example, Caseworker Anita Droddy testified that Mother underwent the psychological evaluation but that "[Mother] ha[d] not successfully completed the recommendations" including "intensive out patient treatment" and "individual counseling." Tr. at 42. Droddy further testified that although Mother submitted to a parenting evaluation and, while at Third Phase, was working towards completing the resulting recommendations, Mother "left without those being completed." Id.

Mother admitted at the fact-finding hearing that she has a current drug problem and that she is addicted to cocaine. She further admitted to having used cocaine in April 2006. Despite these admissions, however, at the time of the termination hearing, Mother still had not submitted to a drug and alcohol evaluation. Additionally, Droddy testified that, due to Mother's incarceration and subsequent transience throughout the CHINS proceedings, she had been unable to request that Mother participate in even one random drug screen. Finally, the record reveals that Mother had not participated in visitation with S.T. since November 2006.

When asked why she would not recommend that S.T. be placed with Mother, Droddy responded, "I think the history of the inconsistent home, I don't know what her home is like

at the present time, [and] she just has a lot of goals that she has not completed successfully and these need to be completed before we can recommend that." <u>Id.</u> at 45. Additionally, when asked if she thought Mother ought to be given more time to complete services, Droddy replied, "No I don't, she has had plenty of time and she has been in situations where she has had time, transportation, [and] people to support her to get that done. And it was very clear what was expected of her and it didn't get completed." <u>Id.</u> at 51.

"A pattern of unwillingness to deal with parenting problems and to cooperate with those providing social services, in conjunction with unchanged conditions, support a finding that there exists no reasonable probability that the conditions will change." <a href="Lang v. Starke">Lang v. Starke</a>
<a href="County Office of Family & Children">County Office of Family & Children</a>, 861 N.E.2d 366, 372 (Ind. Ct. App. 2007), <a href="trans.denied">trans.denied</a>. Also, "the failure to exercise the right to visit one's child demonstrates a lack of commitment to complete the actions necessary to preserve [the] parent-child relationship."
<a href="Id">Id</a>. (internal quotation omitted). Based on the foregoing, we cannot say that the trial court's decision to terminate Mother's parental rights to S.T. was clearly erroneous.

## Conclusion

The JCDCS proved by clear and convincing evidence there is a reasonable probability that the conditions resulting in S.T.'s removal and continued placement outside Mother's care will not be remedied. Accordingly, the trial court's judgment terminating Mother's parental rights is hereby affirmed.

Affirmed.

BAKER, C.J., and RILEY, J., concur.